

Teen Scene XXIII — February 9, 2009

BY MELANIE R. WELLS

Some surprisingly astute teen advice to parents, along with an inside peek at high school social life, was offered at NYC-Parents in Action's 23rd annual Teen Scene panel seminar. Sponsored by NYC-Parents in Action in cooperation with the Parents League of New York, the event presented a dozen friendly, articulate high school students from independent day and boarding schools, who responded to moderator Lucy Martin Gianino's questions with refreshing frankness.

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Discussion was far ranging but the thematic note struck again and again was the value teens place on an open line of communication with their parents. "The biggest punishment for me would be if my parents don't trust me," said one girl, while another advised parents that establishing an "open honest relationship" with "you there to help" is the "best you can do." A third reported that "teaching [parents] how to text and IM" had helped her mother "feel much more confident," and in the loop.

Why is texting so important? Because, as one boy explained, it's "not loud;" kids can discreetly contact parents when out with peers. Others said texting makes it "easier to get the message out quickly" without "interrupting" the social flow. Asked how often kids text parents while out, answers ranged from "every time I change my location" to "every 30-45 minutes," to calling at prearranged "set times."

Is there a downside to the Internet, IM's and texting? Should parents set limits? Most panelists recommended giving kids some freedom. "Let kids experiment with time management instead of just setting rules," said one. Don't force, but do advise, your

teen to control and limit use, especially during exams. "While technology is scary to parents, it's part of our future," said one girl, and "learning to use it responsibly" part of "our high school experience." However, another confessed she had "had to deactivate" Facebook because her SAT tutor had insisted upon it. One teen observed that the lack of "real" face time has led to an increase in teen "awkwardness."

Well then, where DO kids socialize face to face? Favorites were sports events, dinners out with friends, parties at someone's house. Ms. Gianino asked about parties where parents are not home. One girl said it's "comforting" that my mom "won't let me go to a party without a parent," while another insisted she'd "be angry if my parents called ahead" to ask about parental presence. Most agreed it's "about the individual relationship you establish with your child" with trust being the key: "Trusting that your child will behave responsibly" is better than "calling to check up." "If you know your kids and their friends, that's what matters."

What if your parents trust you but not the other kids? One girl acknowledged she'd been warned to "stay away from certain friends" and that the advice had "paid off." Another advised parents to "offer your thoughts in the form of an opinion" rather than just "don't do this or that." "Be honest with your kids" and they'll be "more inclined to call you" when in trouble, urged a third. Said a senior, "I've called my parents to pick me up about 15 times and they never made me feel bad, they always made me feel safe." All agreed parents should let kids know "you're there to help" and it's "okay to make mistakes sometimes."

What about drinking? "If your kid comes home drunk, talk to him or her about it," said several. "Don't be afraid they won't think you're cool," said one panelist, adding "How cool is it if you end up in a hospital drunk?" Some probed the reasons behind abuse: "Kids who turn to drink and drugs have problems from the outset," said one. "Help them feel comfortable." Another noted: "[Teens] feel awkward,

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then they drink and feel better.” Peer pressure can be a “huge catalyst for drinking,” said one boy, but another found most kids are “very accepting” of those who don’t drink. Not everyone drinks, he emphasized: some “don’t drink at all.” At parties, some kids are sober while others “can’t even stand up.” Practical advice was offered: “If your kids drink, remind them to eat first.” On a more serious note was the warning: “Kids mirror the behavior of their parents.”

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Drugs? Most agreed that pot or “weed” is ubiquitous. “Many kids don’t consider pot to be a drug, just something you do when you are stressed out.” One panelist added cocaine, saying it’s more common in “affluent areas,” like “the Upper East Side.” What about prescription drugs? Several mentioned Adderall, an ADD treatment. During exams, said one, “kids look for the kid who has a prescription,” hoping to “get through” the exam period. One girl said Adderall is “more prevalent with girls” because it “suppresses the appetite” as well as “increases focus.”

One girl urged parents to “talk to your kids about drugs and their effects.” Several panelists agreed that ready money facilitates drug use. Stressing that although she was “not about controlling parents,” one girl still advised the audience to “be careful about how much money you give” your kids and “monitor how they spend it.” When asked about allowance size (answer: \$20 is low, with \$35-\$40 the average), one boy noted that a friend with a \$70 allowance was “the first person to buy weed.”

Ms. Gianino asked the panel to explain the term “hooking up.” “My mom asks me [that] on a weekly basis,” said one; another said it is shorthand for “dating in our time,” but the precise meaning is somewhat fluid. One boy said dating was “actually a lot of fun” and regretted more don’t try it – “I think the problem is a confidence thing,” he added. A “one on one date” can be “awkward,” agreed several, citing worries about

appearance. One said some girls are “not comfortable” eating “in front of boys.”

If a couple is dating, parents should “expect sex.” Panelists urged parents to talk openly with their teens in advance: “Talk about [sex] prior to when you think it happens,” they advised; one recommended parents ask questions “bluntly” so the conversation “won’t be so awkward.” Many looked to parents for support: a girl was grateful for talks with mom “about health risks as well as emotional consequences,” while a senior boy appreciated “frequent talks” in which his father, “man to man,” had taught him “to be a gentleman.” He “broke it down for me in 4th or 5th grade,” the boy added, and has “checked up” since.

Ms. Gianino then invited audience questions:

Q Are you using condoms?

A A senior girl reported that in her class of 100 kids, “probably 85” were sexually active and likely “all using them,” adding, “You should expect your kids to use them also.”

Q What punishments worked for you?

A Some said that they hadn’t been “formally punished” or didn’t consider it effective (“grounding is outdated”), although one boy thought there “should be rules, and consequences for breaking them.” Panelists agreed teens should “face the consequences of their actions;” parents were urged to help “find solutions together.” Parents were advised to “punish kids for dishonesty” but not for making a mistake. Loss of money was singled out as the one effective punishment: “Tell them if they don’t want to follow rules, find a way to get their own money,” advised a panelist.

Q Where do kids get liquor?

A Teens can “get a fake ID for \$150 and then can go buy liquor” said several. Where to buy an ID? Senior girl: “I don’t have one, but they can be found.”

Q What are you most afraid of, with respect to sex, drugs, alcohol?

A Loss of control in any form was universally dreaded; listed were “going crazy, throwing up, having to call 911, going to the hospital, wandering the streets and getting lost.” Fear for friends who “get high and start acting out of control” was also cited. One girl noted: “When you should worry is when teens don’t fear any consequences.”

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Q How many of you have dinner with your parents on a regular basis?

A All hands went up. “When we do, things come out, because it’s so relaxed,” said one.

Ms. Gianino concluded with a nod to the panel’s central message: that parental involvement does matter and its effect on our future is great. Quoting from the chapter “Next Generation” in *Teenagers Learn What They Live* by Drs. Dorothy Nolte and Rachel Harris, Ms. Gianino reminded parents that “every teen has a unique perspective” and that as the “next generation to take care of the planet,” teens need parental input to help them “become people who can build a better world.” Our kids are “our greatest contribution to building a better world,” she concluded, and “our expectations will become part of what they are.” ●

PRESIDENT'S Letter

Spring 2009



AIMEE GARN

A few summers ago, our family spent a week in Maine with a friend and her extended family. When I called my friend in the autumn, she answered the phone in a whisper; Abby, her cousin's teenage daughter, had committed suicide. My image of the lively girl who swam and cooked lobster dinners with us dissolved into an image of a sixteen-year-old alone in her room, going from chatting on the Internet to ending her life by hanging.

I had read stories about teenage suicide, but this was the first time I had known the child and her family. I was devastated, and my daughters were shocked. We wrote condolence letters and made a donation in Abby's memory—but there seemed little else we could do, which added to our sorrow.

Suicide is often described as “a permanent solution to a temporary problem,” and is particularly heartbreaking when chosen by teenagers who are not able to understand the long-term consequences of their actions. This year four families in New York schools lost a child by suicide or sudden accident. We feel grief for each incident. While details come to light as families and friends deal with such tragedies, a mystery remains at the core. Some of the teenagers may have suffered from depression or other emotional issues, may have been in treatment or exhibited warning signs—but not all of them. Their parents, like the rest of us in the community, are left with one despairing question: “Why?”

In spite of the joys and possibilities of youth, few of us would return to adolescence. Teenagers, in discovering whom they are and what they want to do, are challenged by physical and emotional changes. They feel the weight of great expectations and the pressure to please not only themselves but also their community of parents, teachers, coaches or friends. Adolescence can be fraught with the pain of disappointment and the consequences of poor judgment. From an adult perspective, we know that sad feelings change, obstacles can be overcome and difficult times pass. Our

wish is that our children will gain this perspective by learning over time and through experience.

As supportive parents, we can provide empathy and guidance. We can help our children build resilience by listening and sharing our vantage point with them. For children who have experienced loss in their immediate communities we can seek added counseling. Talk to your teenagers about issues of mental health, and let them know that if they do experience difficulty there are tremendous resources available in this city. On the NYC-Parents in Action Web site we have added to the list of resources. For more information on mental health issues, please go to www.parentsinaction.org. There are also many helpful video clips and articles on the subject at www.aboutourkids.org. While offering these resources is a small step to take in the face of great losses, we hope it will provide support to parents in our community. ●

Thank you ... to the members of the Board of NYC-Parents in Action, the Facilitators and School Representatives, for devoting their time and talents to the organization. Special thanks to the board members who are retiring this year: Barbara Brennan (8 years), Georgia Ford Griscom (1 year), Beaumont Lett (1 year), Pamela Weinberg (2 years), and Margot Ziegler (5 years).

In the 2009-10 school year, NYC-PIA will celebrate its 30th Anniversary of bringing information and services to New York independent school parents. Mary Beth Harvey will take over as President of the board, bringing commitment and vision to her new role. We appreciate the continued guidance of Chairman Emeritus and founder Lynn Manger, and Celeste Rault, who will continue to serve on the board.

Thank you to our supporters, and best wishes for a lovely summer and for success in the transitions to school and college next fall.

—Aimee Garn

Commentary

FROM FREEDOM INSTITUTE

Not That Question!

What to Say When Your Adolescent Asks About Your Past Alcohol/Drug Use

BY CHARLANNE ZEPF BAUERLEIN, L.C.S.W.,
and TESSA KLEEMAN, L.M.H.C.

“So, Dad, how much pot did you smoke when you were my age?” “Did you ever get drunk, Mom? I bet you and your friends were big stoners when you were in high school.” “Have you ever tried cocaine?” Ah, the dreaded questions parents must face! As Counselors providing substance abuse prevention workshops to students, parents and faculty in over 50 NYC independent schools, we are often asked by parents for suggestions on how to communicate with their children and teens about their past alcohol and drug use.

Stories about past parental alcohol/drug abuse leave kids feeling vulnerable with peers and confused about what their parents expect of them.

Bottom line: less is more. It is NOT helpful for a child or adolescent to hear about their parents’ past alcohol or other drug experiences—negative or positive. Stories about past parental alcohol/drug abuse leave kids feeling vulnerable with peers and confused about what their parents expect of them.

Children up to 5th grade: Young children look to their parents for limits and safety in a scary and often chaotic world. Reinforce healthy choices: “Drinking too much alcohol makes people really sick. It’s very unhealthy for the body—the brain and liver especially. That’s why it’s illegal for anyone under 21 years old to use alcohol.” In some situations you may decide to make a clear statement about not having used drugs. For example, “You know honey, I didn’t use drugs or get drunk. And your Dad and I want and expect you to make healthy choices for your body

Freedom Institute, founded by Mona Mansell in 1976, is a resource center for individuals and families affected by alcohol and drug dependence, providing assessment, intervention, treatment and care. In addition, the Institute provides a comprehensive prevention and education program for young people through their work in independent schools.

too.” Many parents feel comfortable making this clear statement to young children even if that wasn’t their experience! When the kids are older, different conversations can ensue.

Middle and Upper School: If and when teens ask about your experience with alcohol/other drugs, they are likely indicating that drugs are on their mind and perhaps the issue is becoming stressful. They are looking for clear guidelines and they want to know your expectations—is it okay for them to get drunk/high? This is a good opportunity for you to explain where you stand. Our favorite response to this question is something like: “You might not like my answer, but, you know honey, knowing whether I did or did not use drugs isn’t really going to help you make a good choice. If I did smoke pot, you might think it’s okay for YOU to smoke because I turned out okay, and if I never even tried pot, you might think I’m not a good resource to come to with questions. It’s called a Catch-22.”

It is important to remember that adolescents cannot integrate your negative experiences into their world. Hearing that you used drugs “but learned the hard way that they were bad” gives teens more of a permission slip to use substances than a warning not to. Years ago, we had a tenth grader tell us that it “weirded her out” when her mother told her that she smoked pot in high school. The student went on to say that she felt “less guilty” when she started smoking pot with her friends.

NOT THAT QUESTION CONTINUED

Your teen may question you persistently. Another response to consider: “I don’t feel comfortable talking about whether I did or did not use. My choices are not going to help you now.” It is important to turn the focus back to your teen and his present needs. Teens ask this question because THEY are feeling pressure and likely are in the process of making some difficult choices about drug and alcohol use. They are looking to you to set limits for them.

Some possible conversation starters:

- a. When you are with your friends, do you feel there’s pressure to drink or use other drugs? People rarely force someone to do something they don’t want to do, but what do you think peer pressure REALLY looks like among people your age? Kids often pressure their peers because they are feeling insecure. Kids sometimes try to feel better by putting others down or making you feel uncomfortable.
- b. It sounds like you have some questions about whether or not it’s okay to drink or use drugs.
- c. Are you curious about any particular drugs?
- d. The truth is that my choices have little to do with whatever you are facing. You may find yourself in situations where you have to decide whether to accept the drink (or other drug) or not. I want to do everything I can to support you to NOT take the drink (or drug).
- e. Your Mom and I want you to be clear-headed and in control. We don’t want you to have to have alcohol or other drugs in your system. People make really bad decisions under the influence, from sharing a secret you promised you wouldn’t tell, to cheating on a girlfriend/boyfriend, to getting into a fight or doing something you weren’t ready for sexually. Your body is still developing, and you can actually get addicted to a drug quicker than an adult. Your body is better able to handle alcohol when you’re older.

Parents in recovery: For those who are sober or are in a recovery program, it is important that your children know the family history and its genetic risks. Use “teachable moments” from TV, movies, news articles or the Internet to educate children about alcoholism/addiction. For young children, liken alcohol to an allergy for certain family members: “Alcohol makes Mommy feel sick. It’s not good for my body so I don’t drink it.” As children get older, discuss the genetic vulnerability of all family members to alcohol/other substances: “Our family needs to be extra careful about what we put into our bodies. Our bodies are more at risk than most people for becoming dependent on alcohol or other drugs. The risk of addiction to alcohol or other drugs runs in our family like high blood pressure or diabetes runs in other families.” Explain to your teen, “You have to be even more careful than some of your friends because of our family history.”

In the end, it is helpful for your teen to know that she can always call you in a given situation and you will be there to help. You’re not being permissive or a pushover if you express your love and concern when your child is in trouble, even if he has made a bad choice. Your rules and your empathetic response work together. That’s what healthy discipline is about. What starts out as a stressful question could turn into a fruitful, timely discussion that validates your teen’s feelings and clearly establishes your expectations. ●

Charlene C. Giannetti on Our Children's Cyber World

BY PAMELA AWAD

For some of us, life on Mars brings to mind red skies, spaceships and aliens creatures. For another demographic, life on Mars is otherworldly in its absence of cell phones, computers, iPods and the Internet. Parenting expert and author Charlene C. Giannetti outlined eight strategies for dealing with today's technology when she addressed a luncheon audience on January 13, 2009. Describing technology as the "beast that needs to be tamed," she counseled patience, fortitude and continuous conversation when dealing with the mystery and madness of our children's cyber world.

STRATEGY #1:

With Every Piece of Technology You Buy, Consider the Age of Your Child.

As there are no age-appropriate labels for electronic items, consider what a child really needs. Are cell phones for children of kindergarten age really necessary? Does your young child ever travel alone, unaccompanied by an adult? If the answer is "no," safety concerns are not an issue. Technology plugs children in socially and advertisers seek to hook kids from a young age. Consider what your child needs, not what he or she wants and resist the pressure to give in. Saying "no" is appropriate.

STRATEGY #2:

You are the "Appropriate Use" Manual for Every Piece of Equipment You Buy.

Technology manuals do not explain how to properly use the computer, cell phone iPod, etc. It is a parent's responsibility to explain how to use technology in a safe and responsible manner. Parents should offer guidance, make suggestions, and explain the consequences of improper use. Remind children that nothing dies in cyberspace, postings take on a life of their own and the negative consequences can be long lasting. Ms. Giannetti cited the findings of a University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine

and Public Health study that analyzed 500 MySpace profiles to determine what kinds of information kids are posting. The study found that, of the profiles, 37% mentioned alcohol use, 24% mentioned sex, 14% mentioned or implied involvement in acts of violence and 13% mentioned tobacco use. 200 million Internet users worldwide have MySpace accounts and one quarter of them are under 18. While MySpace and Facebook are a way for youngsters to share common interests with peers, parents need to provide guidance for safe Internet use and be aware of what information is being posted.

STRATEGY #3:

Don't Discount the Influence of TV, Movies and Music.

Although as parents we tend to focus on the Internet, young people are overwhelmingly influenced by the entertainment culture portrayed in the media. Kids emulate behavior they see exhibited by movie stars, TV heroes and musicians and much of that behavior is what they post on Internet sites. TV and the movies sometime showcase undesirable behaviors like smoking, and some of today's music contains violent or misogynistic lyrics. Celebrities, unlike the rest of us, often escape consequences. Giannetti advised familiarizing yourself with your children's media while talking with them often and loudly, the better to hear you above the din.

STRATEGY #4:

Unplug the Equipment.

Is this a fate worse than death? According to Ms. Giannetti, it is not. Kids crave time spent with parents and time spent away from technology can mean more time spent together playing board games, having lunch, taking a walk in the park, doing just about anything. In a busy world where time is precious, it's sometimes easier to let technology substitute for parenting. Ms. Giannetti reminded us that the virtual world pales in comparison to our real one. And in

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an interesting twist, she cited the current economy as a great opportunity to say “no” to additional technology.

STRATEGY #5:

Speak Out Against Bullying Behavior.

Sadly, bullying in cyberspace is a fact of life and both parents and children need to understand the consequences. Kids can become easily upset, depressed, distracted in school, difficult to teach; they may also experience appetite loss and a diminished desire to go to school. Almost every child has been bullied and many have engaged in bullying behavior. Giannetti reminded us that only the technology has changed; children still need to be taught to treat others with respect, parents need to stand up for a child that is being teased and to enlist the support of another adult if the situation becomes overwhelming for the child. Teachers may be especially helpful as they are aware of the social aspects of the classroom; they know which children are loners and who are members of cliques. Most importantly, let your child know she can come to you and you will not penalize her by shutting down the Internet. Unplugging their technology pulls the social rug out from under children. Reassure your child that bullying behavior is not his or her fault and then report it to the appropriate authorities.

STRATEGY #6:

Report Bullying Behavior on the Internet.

Cyberspace is so vast, it is difficult to track down perpetrators and identifying the offender may be difficult. YouTube, MySpace and Facebook have safety centers and continuously work to fine tune their reporting procedures, but the sheer volume of uploads can be overwhelming. As a parent, begin locally with your school and refrain from making the problem a personal crusade. Voice your concern with cyber bullying in general. Alert the appropriate authorities online and print out and save anything offensive. Ms. Giannetti counseled patience as this may take more time than you would think.

STRATEGY #7:

Understand How Technology Has Changed Dating and Dating Behavior.

This is especially important for girls as dating abuse is on the rise. Texting enables boys with control issues to “stalk” girls; some girls have reported receiving over 200 text messages a day. Nonstop texting may initially be viewed as flattering, but can escalate into abuse and violence. Ms. Giannetti emphasized the need for our daughters to understand what comprises a good relationship and for our sons to model their behavior on strong father figures.

STRATEGY #8:

Focus on the Positive.

Nothing endures but change, and technology is changing the world in which we live. The generational truth is that parents are the best source of data for their children and it is the parental voice they hear in their heads. It is from us they learn their most important values, as well as what they need to become productive, kind, generous members of society. As parents, we should think of technology as a way to bond with our children. Ms. Giannetti suggested texting greetings, using e-mail to discuss issues that may be too sensitive to talk about face-to-face and forwarding newspaper articles and other interesting, timely information. In closing, she reminded us that the most important thing we can do here on earth is to keep talking to our children, wherever they are. ●

Charlene C. Giannetti is an adolescent parenting expert and on site development consultant to the National Middle School Association (NMSA). She is a bestselling author and mother of two. With Margaret Sagarese, she has co-authored six books, including *The Roller Coaster Years* and *Cliques*. Their newest release is *Boy Crazy! Keeping Your Daughter's Feet on the Ground When Her Head is in the Clouds* (Broadway Books). She has recently launched a new Web site, www.womanaroundtown.com.

Mount Sinai AHC Presents Seminar on Teen Stress

BY LISA HUFFINES

Joyce Cohen of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center's Advisory Board set the scene at the November 18 seminar "High School... High Stress: Helping Your Adolescent Navigate Stress," with an interesting twist: If there were such a thing as a teen parents' hotline, it might offer options like, "Press one for several long, silent minutes of frustration," or "Find someone else to press two" if you've lost all confidence in your competence as a parent. It was a fitting preamble to the panel discussion, co-sponsored by the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center and NYC-PIA, which recognized that teen stress is a whole-family issue.

The panel discussion recognized that teen stress is a whole-family issue.

The panel consisted of Winthrop Adkins, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Education at Columbia University's Teachers College and founder and president of the Institute for Life Coping Skills; and three representatives of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center: Anne Nucci-Sack, chief medical officer and medical director; senior social worker and supervisor Nora Helfgott; and child and adolescent psychiatrist Celia Blumenthal. The Center's director Dr. Angela Diaz moderated.

No wonder adolescence is stressful, Dr. Diaz pointed out. In addition to the issues their parents wrestled with (sex, drugs, college), today's teens worry about war, terrorists, HIV, Internet safety and privacy, as well as an extremely uncertain economy and job market. Dr. Diaz introduced the four panelists, each of whom spoke to a particular facet of the adolescent experience.

Physical Stress Symptoms

Dr. Nucci-Sack spoke about physical symptoms. Stress, she said, is "a demand for adaptation — usually to changes in one's own life." Certainly, changes abound in adolescence. In addition to the obvious physical changes, brain circuitry is changing.

Perceptions of the world are increasingly intense and emotional, yet the reasoning pathways that will modulate these perceptions in adulthood have not yet developed fully. Teens are breaking away from parental control, and that alters the whole family dynamic — even without attendant divorce, remarriage, new siblings, death or illness in the family, all of which are quite common as well. Many kids change schools during adolescence, which means new friends and a new social landscape that may include dating, sex and substance abuse.

So adolescence is indeed all about adapting and stress. Yet, said Dr. Nucci-Sack, only a small percentage of teens can articulate their concerns or ask for help. Some present somatic symptoms instead, from headaches to muscle aches, excess perspiration or heart palpitations. Chronic recurrent abdominal pain is perhaps the most common complaint studied. Abdominal pain accounts for 10 percent of all pediatric hospital outpatient first visits, Dr. Nucci-Sack said. The good news, she added, is that there is no underlying pathological reason for the pain in 95 percent of these cases, although the pain is real. Dr. Nucci-Sack advised parents to investigate all possible physical causes, but simultaneously explore stress and seek relief through exercise, relaxation techniques, improved sleep and eating habits, and counseling.

Art and Emotional Expression

Nora Helfgott, LCSW, titled her talk, "The Inner World of the Adolescent." Presenting artwork created by teenagers, she identified themes that occur within parent-child relationships as well as the therapeutic relationship. One student's piece revealed the powerful and intense emotions that can be experienced and expressed toward authority figures, said Ms. Helfgott, adding that adolescents' shifting identities are often colored by ambivalence as they explore and nurture aspects of their developing selves. Another drawing emphasized a young man's contemplation of power, danger and protection, while one young adolescent's collage symbolized dreams, belief and hope, despite

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past experiences of hardship, trauma and loss. Regarding communication, Ms. Helfgott said talking to adolescents can be “like shooting hoops—the words don’t always go in, but you get better with practice.” Finally, she shared the wise sentiment of Dr. Donald Winnicott, who stated decades ago, “The only ‘cure’ for adolescence is time.”

Building Lines of Communication

Dr. Celia Blumenthal also sounded the “It’s Only Temporary” theme. Even the more dramatic teen reactions, both to their new bodies and to life stresses (physical symptoms, social withdrawal, unrestrained anger, plummeting grades), may turn out in the end to be no big deal, she said. Of course, this doesn’t mean parents can disengage and wait for adolescence to pass. She cited studies that show teenagers who eat dinner with their families three times a week experience greater school success (even in college) and less substance abuse than teenagers who don’t. Building a strong, communicative relationship with kids when they are children, and maintaining it through adolescence, is the key to warding off trouble. It isn’t the actual dinner that’s important, Dr. Blumenthal said, adding, “Do anything together. Watch *Gossip Girl!*” Make their lives physically consistent, with steady exercise, sleep and diet. Encourage interests in expression, through the arts or any other project that has a communicative function. Maintain a steady presence in their lives, and “don’t get so pulled into their drama that you can’t step back and provide a perspective.”

Blumenthal warned against keeping computers in children’s bedrooms, because it allows teens to isolate themselves. And, she said, fight the urge to criticize. “Children will grow into the space that is provided for them,” she said, “so don’t pen them in with negative expectations or fears. Believe in them.”

Life Stages for Parent and Child

Dr. Adkins pointed out that teens and their parents are at very different life stages and are coping with quite different developmental tasks. He placed teen stress into this dynamic family context. The human race has shown amazing consistencies across time and cultures

in the stages of life we pass through, he said. At each stage, we are working on a certain set of developmental tasks. For teens, body change is a big one; how and when an adolescent grows and matures impacts social roles, sexual identity and peer relationships. Other important developmental tasks of the teen years are separation from parents and early career identity. Adolescence is characterized by a heightened sense of fairness, and a very present-oriented sense of time. To the average teen, the future seems very far away.

Adults in their 40s and 50s are dealing with different issues, notably, a very different time sense: the future, for them, is no longer infinite. Career pyramids are narrowing and possibilities are looking limited. “Parents are asking: ‘Is this it? Do I want all this?’” Adkins said. “At the same time your kid is testing your limits. It can be quite a meeting.” Parents who are not developing and moving forward themselves can become part of the problem in their teen’s development. Overprotective and over demanding parents, he has found, often fit this category.

Counseling, Dr. Adkins said, can facilitate communication between the two generations. He said he’s also a big believer in the weekly “family conference.” Putting issues “on the family agenda” is a good way to minimize heat-of-the-moment confrontations and defer discussion to a calmer time.

Finally, he advised, learn to talk to your teen like a counselor. Counselors are trained listeners; good ones have mastered the arts of paraphrase, reflection of feeling, and questioning, all excellent skills for parents of teens. If you can pick out the main idea in an angry rant and paraphrase it accurately, you are likely to get your child to expand on what is angering him or her. If you can reflect the underlying feelings in the rant, your child will feel you have listened and understood, and may begin really talking about the precursors. Asking open-ended questions that cannot be answered yes or no, (i.e. “How did you feel after it happened?”), elicits your teen’s thoughts and feelings and is a skill any parent of an adolescent would find helpful in opening up dialogue. ●

Taking Flight: The Transition to College

BY TAMARA SHULMAN, PH.D., FAACP

“Leaving the nest,” “empty nest”—so many clichés make our college bound children sound like baby birds, ready to fly, navigate and sustain themselves. The transition from high school to college is emotionally complex for our teens and for us, too. As we encourage our children to stretch their wings and fly out into the wider world we still want to nurture and protect them. Our feelings may range from happiness for their accomplishments to sadness at the impending loss of their daily presence

For the high school senior, there is excitement, even exhilaration in their special status. But no change comes without some loss. Each child is surely feeling the impending separation from familiar surroundings. The one with many friends worries about missing them; the one who has been lonely is concerned about whether college will be a better place.

Even the best students wonder if they will be successful. Those with learning issues are concerned about getting the help they need. Emotionally troubled kids wonder if they will be okay, let alone happy. Our kids may act like everything’s “cool” but below the surface there is turmoil and angst.

As parents, we need to listen to the music as well as to the words, perhaps even more closely when few or no words are spoken. There is no simple “how to” guide, as the process is subtle and individual. However, here are some useful tips:

- Be an active listener.
- Accept that this is a time of change for everyone in the family.
- Follow your child’s lead.
- Recognize your own feelings.
- Work in tandem with your own, your partner’s and your child’s strengths.
- Don’t project your own fears or experiences onto your child.

Be interested and available as a listener. When you are not sure what to say, it is okay to listen and be your child’s sounding board. Supportive comments like “there’s so much going on in your life” or “it sounds like you are thinking about this a lot” may allow your teen to express feelings and share ideas. Jumping in with advice and your own experiences is usually less effective.

It is easier to be a good listener when you are in touch with your own feelings. Parents feel anxious and uncertain too.

It is easier to be a good listener when you are in touch with your own feelings. Parents feel anxious and uncertain too. Talk to your friends and parents of other seniors. Read some of the many books on this topic (*Empty Nest... Full Heart, the Journey from Home to College* by Andrea Van Steenhouse, is a favorite). Accept that this is a time of change, challenge and growth for both parent and child. Even if older siblings have paved the way, each passage is unique.

Follow your teen’s lead. Be available to talk when the child opens the door. Allow your children to express their feelings. Stifle the urge to criticize or to give unsolicited advice and opinions. Let your children use this time to practice working things out on their own in the safety of a familiar environment. If they ask for advice, ask questions rather than lecture. Questions that help teens explore an issue may enable them to resolve it on their own. The process is as valuable as the solution, since they are developing confidence and greater skill at navigating on their own.

Coping with acceptances, deferred status and rejections can be a tumultuous time. Your child’s self esteem is especially vulnerable. In today’s college application process, acceptance is less predictable than in the past. If your child is not admitted to a

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particular college, this may be more about the needs of the school than about whether your child would have thrived there. Kids need to hear from you that they can be happy and successful at many schools, and that their own abilities and efforts will matter more in the long run than which college they attend.

This passage can be a stressful time for a couple whose teen is maturing and getting ready to fly. It is not unusual for couples to approach the process differently. Agreement on all aspects is rare. It is important to respect each other's differing emotional and problem solving styles and it is only natural that these differences may be heightened during a time of family transition and stress. Listen thoughtfully to each other and try to establish common goals.

Find ways to use each partner's strengths to successfully support your young adult's experience.

Find ways to use each partner's strengths to successfully support your young adult's experience. The one who is most comfortable listening can be the calm emotional sounding board. The more action oriented parent can help the student with the practical tasks of responding to college deadlines for acceptances, managing waiting list issues, rooming arrangements, meal plans and other details. Recognize too, that your own experiences in college and leaving home will be different from those of your child. Times have changed and so has the process.

Single parents often have a particularly hard time with the college separation process. The work of completing college applications is burdensome but single-handedly managing the emotional roller coaster of choosing a college, handling rejection, graduating and leaving home is formidable. The experience of loss may be more keenly felt when there is no partner with whom to share it. It can help to reach out to friends and other parents who have weathered this storm successfully.

If you feel overwhelmed by your own emotions consider a support group or professional advice. When you recognize your own feelings and take care of your emotional needs, you are better able to separate these from your child's experience and support his or her transition.

Once the decisions are made and the plans are in motion, parents still need to listen thoughtfully, provide reassurance, and offer practical help. Teens should do as much as they can for themselves with the knowledge that they can seek advice as needed.

A child leaving for college is a major milestone of which all can be proud. It is an accomplishment for the child and the parents. You have made it possible for your child to take this giant step toward independence. Although your teen will soon leave the proverbial nest, if your home has been warm and nurturing, he or she will stay connected even after departure. The sensitivity and support you provide in these next few months can make your home a place to which your children will want to return, sharing new experiences as they continue their progress toward adulthood. ●

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